

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: The Great Fires of 1910 Sometimes referred to as The Big Burn	Incident Date & Time: 08/20/1910
Incident Location: Idaho and Montana	Incident Size 3,200,000 acres (estimated)
Types of resources involved: As-needed laborers and soldiers working as firefighters	# of Fatalities/injuries: 78 firefighter fatalities / 100+ firefighter injuries Many unknown civilian casualties
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities ➤ Civilian mass casualty event 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>In 1905, management of the public forest reserves was given over to a new agency, the United States Forest Service. Between 1905 and 1909, an initial wildfire suppression policy was formulated and promoted by the first Chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot. The agency leadership asserted that unwanted wildfire could be excluded through adequate prevention and control measures and told their forest rangers that they <i>"have no more important duty than protecting the reserves from forest fires."</i> The busy fire season of 1908 provided the new agency an opportunity to develop its firefighting capability; however the actual workforce consisted of as-needed labor provided by miners, loggers, homesteaders, and recent immigrants being overseen by a dispersed corps of agency Forest Rangers.</p> <p>In 1910, conditions across the west were unseasonably dry with below average rainfall during the spring and early summer. Fire activity, both from lightening and human causes, had started in the spring and continued into the summer. Forest Supervisors in Idaho and Montana did their best to control the blazes with the resources they had; a handful of recent forestry graduates, a few forest guards hired from local communities, and whatever labor could be gathered from the mines, timber camps, and bars throughout the west.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>By July of 1910, wildfires were widespread throughout the northern Rocky Mountains. In Washington, western Montana and north Idaho, there were approximately 3,600 firefighters at work. In British Columbia, Oregon, and Washington, half a dozen logging towns had already been burned over, and several people were killed as a result. The Secretary of Agriculture visited the region in mid-July and approved additional emergency fire funding for the US Forest Service, marking the first time this had ever been done for the fledgling agency. In addition, the Western Forestry Association telegraphed President Taft and requested military assistance to provide additional firefighting forces.</p> <p>A strong storm pattern set up over the region in late July. The winds from this series of storms caused many of the existing fires to exceed on-going control efforts. In addition, the lightning that accompanied these storms started hundreds of new fires. This dramatic increase in fire activity soon overwhelmed all firefighting efforts. Large fires were now scattered all along the Montana/Idaho boundary from the Canadian border to the Clearwater River. The town of Wallace, Idaho was at the center of it all and many surrounding communities were being threatened by the growing fires. The situation was also rapidly becoming a national political issue. Finally, on August 7, President Taft authorized his Secretary of War to dispatch 2,500 US Army regular troops with orders to <i>"Lend every assistance possible in suppression of forest fires."</i> During the ensuing weeks companies of soldiers and Forest Service crews were scattered all over the Northwest trying to boost the firefighting efforts. On many of the fires, the renewed effort made noticeable progress.</p> <p>Then, on August 20, a powerful dry cold front raced down from Canada across the Palouse Plain and for two days howled through the Rocky Mountains. Every fire in the path of this cold front leapt to life. The sheer number of uncontrolled fires in the forests provided the conditions for massive fire fronts to form as these fires burned together. Numerous crews and communities found themselves surrounded by walls of flame. There are many stories of heroism and tragedy from this event. Ranger Edward Pulaski holding his crew at gun point in the safe confines of a mine shaft is the most well-known and is a Forest Service legend. The actions of the US Army Buffalo Soldiers of the 25th Infantry, Company G to evacuate the town of Avery and stay to successfully defend it from the fire are also legendary. There too many stories to enumerate here and there are multiple references which describe the many facets of this event.</p> <p>It is worth noting that the Big Burn was not just one fire but a collection of many large catastrophic fires. It is also important to remember that 78 firefighters lost their lives in this battle as well as an unknown number of civilians. Some of the firefighters who perished were never identified due to the urgent hiring methods and lack of documentation. Without modern communication technology and weather prediction capability the rapidly moving cold front surprised many crews on remote fires. Some of the more notable entrapments included:</p>	

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

- On the West Fork Big Creek Fire, 60 firefighters were instructed by their supervisor to choose between two safe areas, the black that had burned the previous day or a creek bottom. 19 firefighters instead chose to take shelter in a nearby homesteader cabin which ignited as the flame front passed. 18 of them perished rushing outside.
- When the 70 firefighters working on the Setzer Creek Fire were instructed by their supervisor to escape downstream to a safe area, 27 of them disregarded the order and chose instead to follow the advice of the camp cook who insisted there was no danger. All 28 lost their lives.
- Even Ranger Pulaski lost 6 men out the 45 firefighters that he led through the flames into Nicholson Mine tunnel where they found shelter for 5 hours while the fire raged outside.

The fires in the northern Rocky Mountains were not the only significant action during the 1910 fire season. Many other areas of the country experienced high wildfire activity, the most prominent being the state of Minnesota where more than one million acres burned that fall with the largest fire being the Baudette Fire at 350,000 acres.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Early logging practices which left tons per acre of dead flammable material throughout the forests.
Long duration drought.
Numerous latent fires left in uncontrolled status.
Multiple widespread lightning storms.
Significant wind event.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Not applicable

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Fires of 1910 are etched into the American conscience as no other fire. *"It managed to burn its way through public indifference and emerged as a charred but positive landmark along the road to forest protection."* This event saved the US Forest Service, which had been in existence for only 5 years, from being dismantled by Congress. And it shaped Forest Service practices and influenced forest management to this very day, primarily due to the 1911 Weeks Act. This piece of congressional legislation provided purchase authority that added nearly 20 million acres to the national forest system and provided funding and authority for the US Forest Service to enter into cooperative agreements with state and private forest owners, thus extending federal forest conservation practices across the nation.

Edward Pulaski remained with the US Forest Service until 1930. Aside from his heroic actions during the fires of 1910, he is also remembered as the father of that most iconic of all firefighting hand tools, the Pulaski. He did not invent the tool, as a similar tool was made by the Collins Tool company in 1876. However, Ed Pulaski had been a blacksmith and refined the tool to be better suited for firefighting. He became a proponent for it and eventually convinced the Forest Service to commercially source it in 1920.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/1910-idaho-fire>
<https://www.nwcg.gov/committee/6mfs/the-big-blowup>
https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb5444731.pdf
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1910/08/20/big-burn-big-blowup-of-1910/>
<https://wildfiretoday.com/documents/1910FiresElersKoch.In1942.pdf>
<https://foresthistory.org/research-explore/us-forest-service-history/policy-and-law/fire-u-s-forest-service/famous-fires/the-1910-fires/>
<https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/bigburn/>
<https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2010/aug/17/pulaskis-heroism-resurfaced-discovery-tunnel/>
<https://mynorthwest.com/2179016/spokane-buffalo-soldiers-big-burn-of-1910/>

Video:

- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/burn/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aa71I-t8bJw>

Books:

- *The Year of the Fires: The Story of the Great Fires of 1910* ~ by Stephen J. Pyne
- *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America* ~ Timothy Egan

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

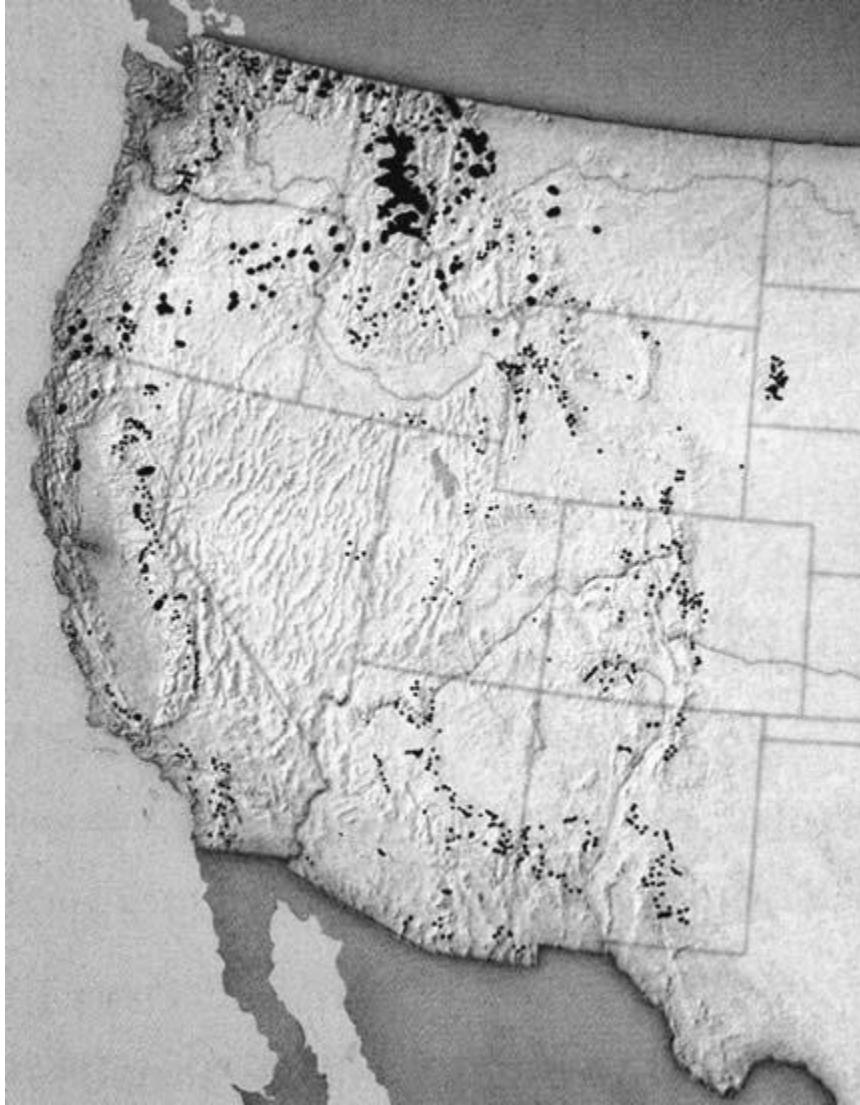
The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents.
[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](http://wildfire.gov)

This summary page was proudly provided by:
Jim Cook & Kurt La Rue

September 2023

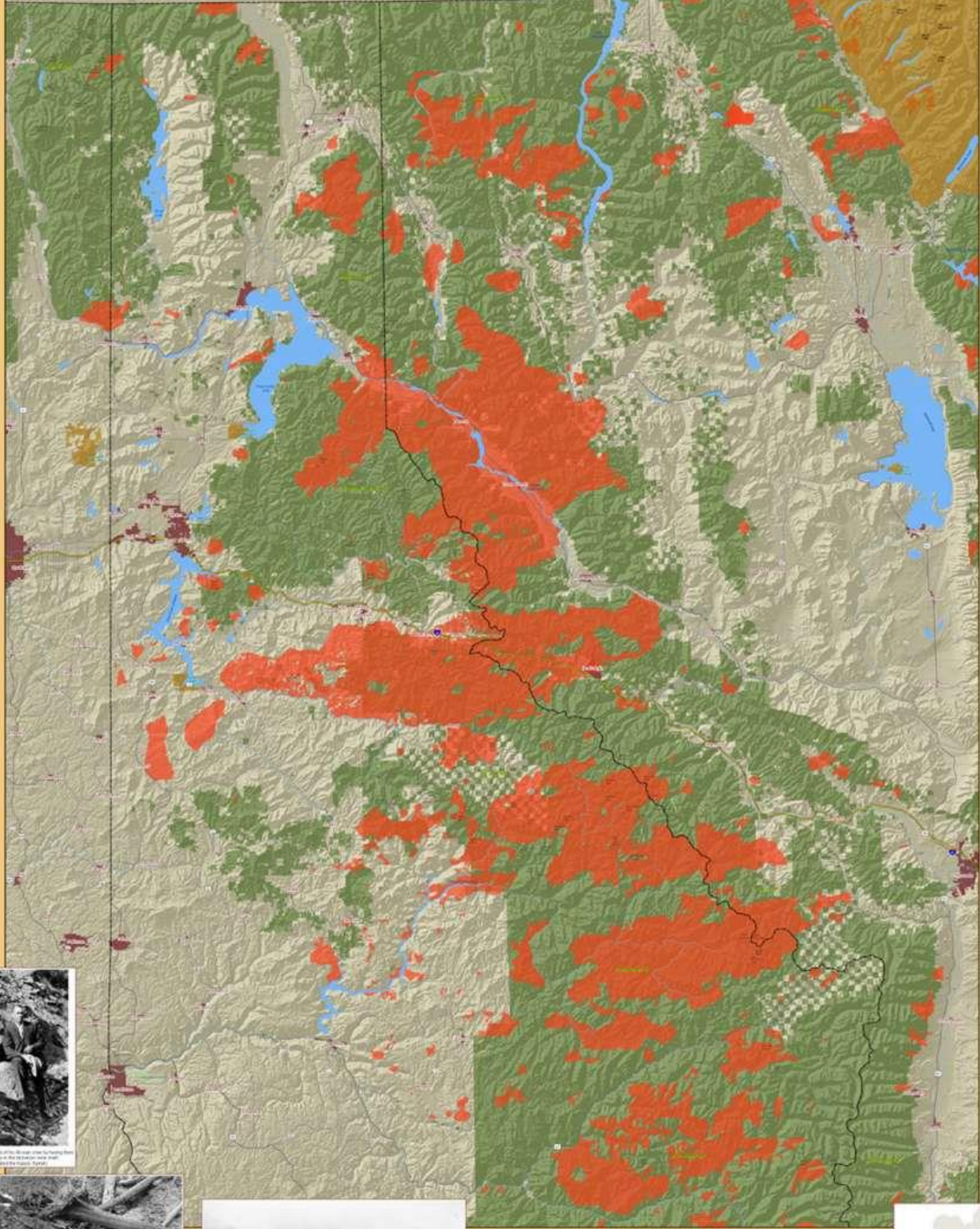


Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project



Map shows major fire activity recorded in the western United States during the summer of 1910

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project



The Great 1910 Fire
of Idaho & Montana

